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CIA 'have evidence' of Agca's Sofia ties

By IAN BALL in New York

AMERICAN intelligence officials believe they have found "convincing" evidence already to hand that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk convicted of attempting to assassinate the Pope, had some "Bulgarian connection."

They appear to be satisfied that Agca spent time in Bulgaria and associated with several Bulgarians in Rome before he made his attack on the Pope in St Peter's Square in May 1981.

But, on the basis of information provided by the Italian government, much of it developed from statements made by Agca after his conviction, American Intelligence is not ready to conclude that the relationship between Agca and the Bulgarians had anything to do with the assassination attempt.

The Central Intelligence Agency insists that it is not conducting an independent investigation into Agca's background and his Bulgarian links. "It is an Italian matter," said a senior official.

'Poison the air'

Reagan Administration officials have left the strong impression that there is a political reason for restraint. The chief element is the growing White House interest in a possible summit between President Reagan and Mr Andropov, the Soviet leader.

The NEW YORK TIMES said yesterday there was "an understanding in the Administration not to poison the air with charges that might present such a meeting and might not be substantiated."

At the time of the attempt on the Pope's life, the new Russian leader was directing the Global affairs of the K.G.B., an organisation which tends to regard the Bulgarian Secret Police almost as a branch office.

On this basis, if Bulgarian complicity in the plot against the Pope were ever proved, the finger would also be pointed at the man who now rules in the Kremlin.

According to the NEW YORK TIMES, American intelligence analysts are working on two theories to explain an Agca-Bulgarian Connection which appears to date from 1979:

The Bulgarians hired Agca either as an assassin or drug-trade enforcer in an arrangement that had nothing to do with the Pope and the Soviet Union.

Moscow, concerned about support that the Pope, a

Pope, might give to the Solidarity free trade, union movement in Poland, asked the Bulgarian Secret Service in 1979 to find someone who could someday assassinate the Pope.

Meanwhile the State Department has officially denied that it has been discouraging journalists from investigating charges of Bulgarian and Russian involvement in the Agca case to avoid worsening East-West relations.

Heroin trafficking

One of the shadowy figures in the Agca affair tracked down by the American Press is Bekir Celenk, a self-made Turkish businessman, who is being held on Sofia.

He claims his money comes from legitimate export-import deals, but who is suspected by American narcotics agents of being a major figure in heroin and morphine trafficking.

In an interview monitored by Bulgarian security officials, Celenk has admitted meeting, through a friend, Musar Cedar Celidi, the Turk who was extradited from West Germany to Rome earlier this month on suspicion of having given a small amount of money to Agca in Zurich two months before he shot the Pope.

GUN-RUNNING

Austrians look for link

Our MUNICH CORRESPONDENT writes: Austrian authorities are still investigating the possibility of a link between the assassination attempt on the Pope and a gun-running operation from Czechoslovakia, involving the Austrian arms dealer, Horst Grillmayer, and Peter Bardon, a Czechoslovak.

Both men were arrested on Jan. 11 following an attempt by Bardon allegedly to bring into Austria from Czechoslovakia Russian-designed weapons, including the highly accurate Dragov sniper rifle.

The Austrians are also investigating reports from Italy that the weapon used to shoot the Pope had a licence issued in the name of Grillmayer.

Lawyer flies to Sofia

ALAN CORPUS IN ROME writes: Dr Giuseppe Consolo, a defence lawyer representing Serghei Antonov, the Bulgarian airline employee held in Rome and accused of participating in the attempt to kill the Pope, left Rome yesterday for Sofia to explain the judicial reasons for Antonov's continued detention in Italy.